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Publisher: Routledge

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The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsix20>

Portland in the 1960s: stories from the counterculture

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Published online: 15 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Blake Slonecker (2013) Portland in the 1960s: stories from the counterculture, *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, 6:1, 116-119, DOI: [10.1080/17541328.2013.834193](https://doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2013.834193)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2013.834193>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2013.834192>

Portland in the 1960s: stories from the counterculture, by Polina Olsen, Charleston, SC, History Press, 2012, 160 pp., \$19.00 (pbk), ISBN-10: 1609494717

Beginning in February 1970, New Leftists centered on the Portland *Willamette Bridge* – Oregon’s flagship underground newspaper – planned what they hoped would become a touchstone protest that August. Organizers of the People’s Army Jamboree (PAJ) tapped into the nationwide underground network and set out to attract as many as 25,000 activists to Portland to protest the weeklong American Legion National Convention and a rumored keynote address by President Richard Nixon. At the very least, hundreds of activists representing the Seattle Liberation Front were expected to motor down Interstate 5 to provide shock troops. But once summer rolled around, hip Portlanders faced a difficult decision. For just as PAJ protests got underway at Memorial Coliseum, folks gathered 25 miles east of Portland to celebrate the Vortex Festival of Life at McIver State Park. The genesis of Vortex resembled patronage politics on psychedelics. Indeed, Oregon Governor Tom McCall sponsored the festival specifically to distract potential protestors from the PAJ. And his plan worked. Whereas Vortex attracted 40,000 concertgoers over its opening weekend, PAJ protesters measured in the hundreds. The gate receipts from those two gatherings illuminate the values that guided Portland’s hip community at the dawn of the 1970s. Counterculture thrived; action politics never quite took root.

The Movement in Portland produced at least two notable sixties historians. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin worked together at the *Willamette Bridge* three decades before co-authoring *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*. But sixties Portland has not inspired a parallel historiography. Perhaps that is surprising. In his 2009 study of Oregon’s utopian heritage, *Eden within Eden*, the late James J. Kopp observed that scholars, boosters, city planners, and communards have all pointed to Portland as a planned urban Ecotopia.¹ In light of the interpretive shift from Theodore Roszak – who emphasized the counterculture’s rejection of the technocratic society in 1969 – to Fred Turner – who emphasized that “the New Communalists [fused] technocentrism and celebration of knowledge and experimentation ... with their individual quests to create alternative communities” in 2006 – historians of the counterculture would be well served to trace the emergence of hip

urban spaces.² Can green urban development trace origins to sixties social experiments? Portland represents an apt case study for such long counterculture histories. Yet the hip archaeology of twenty-first-century Portland remains unexamined.

Enter the History Press and Polina Olsen. Since its founding in 2004, the History Press has aimed at “preserving and enriching community by empowering history enthusiasts to write local stories for local audiences.”³ That emphasis on local history is evident in more than a thousand History Press titles, including Polina Olsen’s *Stories from Jewish Portland* (2011) and *Portland in the 1960s: Stories from the Counterculture* (2012). Olsen’s interest in the sixties is not dispassionate; she helped organize New York’s Student Peace Union and Vietnam Peace Parade Committee. In 1977, she settled in Oregon, where she now works as a freelance writer.

Despite Olsen’s New York origins, the shadow of San Francisco looms over *Portland in the 1960s*. Indeed, Olsen paints Portland (1960 population: 370,000) as an aspiring San Francisco (1960 population: 740,000). So do her subjects. Patrick Lloyd Jones describes a “Portland Be-In” (p. 17). Jim Gilbert recalls free soup meals modeled on the Diggers (p. 24). Mary Ann Pickens cannot resist the comparison to San Francisco when she remembers her late-1950s arrival in Portland: “It was a big change from the Bay Area. Portland was laid back, ultra-conservative and wet” (p. 39). And of course no account of the counterculture would be complete without a cameo from Allen Ginsberg, who sparked a 1967 controversy when he appeared nude on the cover of the Portland State College newspaper, *The Vanguard*.

Consequently, *Portland in the 1960s* follows the counterculture narrative that developed from early studies of San Francisco’s hip transition from North-Beach beatniks to Haight-Ashbury hippies (a term that Olsen employs without scruple). Part I tracks the shift “from beat to hip” by exploring Portland’s 1950s coffee shops (the Caffè Espresso, Flem Snopes, the Way Out), alternative bookstores (Days and Nights), and artist communities (the Thirteenth Avenue Gallery, The Village colony). Part II tracks counterinstitutions like the Psychedelic Supermarket, the Willamette Learning Center, the Outside In clinic, and the *Willamette Bridge* that often blurred the line between political and cultural rebellion. Then the book turns. Part III explores “action” politics centered on Portland State College and Reed College.

That closing section is mixed. Olsen offers some keen insights on the Movement of the late sixties. She argues that the democratic structure of the *Willamette Bridge* facilitated the emergence of women’s liberation and gay liberation in Portland. And she capably tracks the revitalization of Centenary Wilbur Church as a vibrant activist space after 1965. But other choices muddy Olsen’s analytical waters. Anyone writing about the movements of the sixties must struggle with nomenclature. This is often a tiresome task best resolved by extreme caution or bold revisionism. Olsen does neither, instead latching onto the omnibus “counterculture” to describe Portland’s heterogeneous collection of radical sensibilities. Clearly, spontaneous folk concerts in Lair Hill Park were counterculture products. Likewise, the Storefront Theatre fit the bill. But when stereotypers from the *Oregonian* and the *Oregon Journal* led a 1959 newspaper strike, or when Portland’s Black Panther Party created a breakfast program, the category “counterculture” loses meaning.

Nevertheless, Olsen showcases her access to community institutions and evidences a firm sense of public space. Those assets are most evident in Olsen’s intro-

duction, which maps the late-sixties evolution of Lair Hill Park into “the center of Portland’s hippie community” (p. 15). Olsen also boasts a keen eye for the complex relationship between run-of-the-mill Portlanders and run-for-the-hills hippies. Letters to various city officials that Olsen unearthed in the Portland City Archives reveal sometimes comedic interactions between the local counterculture and city residents. (The director of the Portland Junior Museum worried that hippies in Lair Hill Park were “still ‘in bed’ in the middle of the playground” at 2.30 in the afternoon and noted that “sometimes hippie love is mighty close to sexual intercourse” [p. 22].) Elsewhere, Olsen draws attention to the “mixed clientele” of the Thirteenth Avenue Gallery, “where beatniks joined young families and curious neighborhood teens” (p. 37). That mainstream perspective is rendered almost inevitable by Olsen’s reliance on the *Oregonian*, reflecting a major methodological challenge for counterculture historians exploring the years prior to the rise of the underground press.

Beyond its use of mainstream media, *Portland in the 1960s* utilizes some impressive evidence. Olsen has gathered an array of black and white images – some evocative, others filler. And she documents a host of hip scenes – stopping for coffee at the Caffe Espresso; munching on free peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches at the Psychedelic Supermarket; popping into the Outside In free clinic after a bad trip. But Olsen’s use of oral history illuminates a major flaw. Although *Portland in the 1960s* employs a goodly number of oral histories, those interviews are included in large chunks (in several places occupying two full pages of text). That leaves the reader with the burden of identifying the book’s themes. Consequently, Olsen’s evocative collection of framed scenes does not add up to an overarching narrative argument about the Movement in Portland.

That is especially evident when Olsen narrates the tension between the People’s Army Jamboree and the Vortex Festival of Life. Governor McCall understood that a little folk music would go a long way in accentuating the divisions between Portland’s New Left and counterculture. And Olsen seems to understand that fact. Indeed, her best prose describes the absurd scene at Vortex in vivid contrast to the PAJ:

Contrary to expectations, the PAJ was small and relatively peaceful. Meanwhile [at Vortex] officials ignored drug use and public nudity violations, and police stationed along the highway helped travelers find McIver Park. Business and government groups set up sanitary facilities, offered free food and stayed out of the way. (p. 118)

Olsen elegantly sets these parallel scenes, but never provides a clear analysis of the relationship between political and cultural radicalism that they warrant.

All told, *Portland in the 1960s* suggests rich avenues for future historical inquiry. The sparsely populated scenes in many of the book’s photographs raise questions about the scale of counterculture endeavor. The voyeurism of middle-class Portlanders – in Lair Hill Park, at the Thirteenth Avenue Gallery, at Vortex – raises questions about class dynamics and contested urban space. Surprisingly common friendliness between hippies and state officials raises questions about local law enforcement under Nixon’s law-and-order regime. The activist dynamic at Portland State College following the Kent State tragedy raises questions about the derivative nature of student activism. The energizing role of Centenary Wilbur Church raises continued questions about America’s theological responses to sex, drugs, and rock and roll. And the role of the counterculture in giving shape to contemporary hip Portland is the biggest – though least examined – question of all. None of these

tensions are new to historians of the sixties. But Olsen's ground-level view of the Portland Movement opens a new space to raise such familiar and fruitful questions.

Notes

1. Kopp, *Eden within Eden*, 180–4.
2. Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*; Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 244.
3. The History Press, "Mission."

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17541328.2013.834193>

The John Lennon letters, edited with an introduction by Hunter Davies, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2012, 392 pp., US\$29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0316200806

John Lennon, it turns out, was always writing – not just music and lyrics, but also letters and postcards, full of jokes and puns, often illustrated by his distinctive and whimsical drawings. This handsome book includes 285 items introduced and annotated by Hunter Davies, the authorized biographer of the Beatles; each is reproduced in facsimile with a transcription next to it. Relevant illustrations are included.

The volume didn't do well with a lot of the British critics, who called it "an indiscriminate grab bag" and a collection of trivia. The shopping lists from Lennon's Dakota days, when he withdrew from the public eye in 1974 to become a househusband, came in for particularly harsh criticism. A list including the item "Grape Nuts – not Flakes," carefully dated and annotated by Davies, earned particular ire – although another list includes "Bend in the River-V.S. Naipaul" along with "strawberries," which is pretty interesting.

But for people who care about Lennon, the cards and drawings here are wonderfully vivid and alive. Lennon was writing funny stuff before he played music – starting with the legendary "Daily Howl" a hand-written satirical "newspaper"